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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: SAUDI RELIGIOUS SCHOLAR'S "REMINDER" ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS

REFS:

[1A](#). RIYADH 887
[1B](#). RIYADH 888

SUMMARY

[11](#). (U) In late July a senior religious scholar who is an adviser to the King wrote a column in the Saudi Arabic daily Al-Watan, recalling the Quranic stipulation that women have rights in equal measure to their obligations. The column illustrates a new approach to improving the status of women among religious moderates. Comments on the newspaper's website in response reveal skepticism and frustration but also demands for change. End summary.

A PROGRESSIVE CONSERVATIVE
STRATEGY TO EXPAND WOMEN'S RIGHTS?

[12](#). (SBU) As a group of scholars from Imam Muhammad University told the Charge recently (ref A), there is a growing movement toward more moderate, open and progressive interpretations of Islam, though it may not be immediately recognizable to outsiders as such. In fact, one of their key messages was that they wanted to accommodate change without naming it as such. They also said that they sought to develop a new narrative to package change and accommodate a new approach to the status of women but that their approach had to be based on authentically Saudi concepts and tradition to avoid the taint of Western ideas and toxic Saudi "liberals." A three-part column by a leading Saudi scholar published in late July in the progressive newspaper Al-Watan provided a glimpse of how this strategy is developing.

RHETORIC: EQUAL RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES?

[13](#). (U) The title of the column was a 4-word phrase from a Quranic verse (2:228) that is often cited as a reference for the concept of equal rights for women. One Embassy contact explained that the phrase had come to be viewed by some as an empty slogan, since "they always say it to show women have equality in Islam, but then they don't do anything." The Arabic is extremely terse, and translations vary, but the meaning most often given is roughly, "women have such honorable rights as obligations." It comes from the Quran's second (and longest) chapter, in a verse that deals with divorce and the balance of rights and responsibilities between husbands and wives. [Note: The full line is "Wa lihunna mithl alathi alayhunna bilmaarouf" Literally, "To them (feminine) the equivalent of what is from them (feminine), equitably." End note]

REALITY, TAKE 1: THE SHEIKH REPORTS DARK STORIES

[14](#). (U) With the Quranic stipulation for equity as context, senior scholar Sheikh Abdullah bin Sulaiman al-Munai' wrote about injustice towards Saudi women. He described complaints from women who had called him to protest a previous column in which he had urged Muslim women to strive to meet their Islamic duties and obligations. The

women had shared stories of their mistreatment, including being forced to hand over salaries, being married off to settle family debts, and suffering from absentee husbands and multiple wives. One asked how Muslim women could be expected to fulfill their obligations if they were denied their rights. Al-Munai', who is an adviser to the King, wrote that "there was no doubt that there were many of these dark stories which suggested corrupted homes and disturbed social life and the emergence of a new generation living in chaotic family life." He called on Saudi men to prove their true manhood by treating women justly, confirming that women had the same rights as men, including for dignity and financial independence and control of their own lives. Guardianship, he suggested, was not about control but equity, with obligations and rights for both men and women.

REALITY, TAKE 2: WHAT RIGHTS?

15. (U) His readership was apparently not impressed. Extensive reaction to the article on the al-Watan website (in Arabic), mostly from women, echoed the skepticism of our Embassy contact cited above. For example:

--But Sheikh, wrote one, it is not enough to only say to men "fear God in treating women," because then people will turn their backs on the dramas of Saudi girls. Girls should be able to call an official department that can verify the injustice done to women and get them their rights back through just trials and clear written laws.

--Another reader commented: Islamic Shari'a granted us everything, but unfortunately it is not applied... in Saudi Arabia a woman cannot even bring herself a maid with her own money or her own ID. .

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. everything we want to do is in the hands of a guardian. You say she has the right to choose her own husband - ha - she cannot even manage her own money.

A SHEIKH OF THE SULTAN

16. (SBU) The Sheikh, born in Nejd in 1928, is a member of the Senior Council of Religious Scholars, and was appointed as an adviser to the King last year. Educated at Imam Muhammad University, he was a judge in Mecca. In addition to his Al-Watan column, Al-Munai' hosts a call-in show on Saudi television, where he dispenses Islamic advice on the gamut of social issues. Considered by observers as one of the "Sheikhs of the Sultan" (i.e., he hews to government policies) he is known as a moderate traditionalist who steers clear of political issues.

COMMENT: THIS IS PROGRESS?

17. (SBU) In many countries, debates on social issues are often difficult to penetrate because the warring parties speak in code and use slogans often unfathomable to outsiders. This is particularly the case in the increasingly public and passionate arguments on the role of women in Saudi Arabia, where all sides must take care to couch their arguments in Islamically-correct language. Foreign observers in the Kingdom are apt to mistake arguments laden with Qur'anic references as signaling opposition to progress, especially with respect to women's rights. However, as the Embassy is learning from its broadening contacts among Saudi Arabia's religious establishment (ref b), this can be a mistake. Sheikh Munai's column is a noteworthy example of how a supposedly apolitical senior conservative religious figure is helping to shape the debate on women's rights and provide a platform that allows some women to articulate their problems and demand solutions.

ERDMAN